

**American Theatre Magazine:**

“... the last Elements production was a robust, bloody rendition of *Julius Caesar*, staged in the stately courtyard to the church – which should indicate that neither the church community nor the audience is full of shrinking violets.”



# CAPE COD TIMES

## BEHIND THE SCENES *FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER AIMS FOR REALISM IN ELEMENTS' 'JULIUS CAESAR'*

By **KATHI SCRIZZI DRISCOLL, CAPE COD TIMES**

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For fight choreographer Nick Sandys, stage combat is about far more than just steps and actions – it's also about character.

“I teach people what it's really like to be involved in violence, and not only give violence, but also receive it,” says Sandys, who is also an educator, actor and director. “I'm talking to actors about making it real. In ‘Julius Caesar,’ every character has a name. You're killing people who you know, and that changes everything. It's a cruel war, brother against brother.” So he wants the audience to feel the visceral reaction that the actor does when violence happens, and he wants to make sure “those emotions carry through for the rest of the play.”

Sandys talked about his methods while in Orleans for three days last month working with the Elements Theatre Company cast of Shakespeare's “Julius Caesar.” He had already trained several of the actors in the basics of stage combat when they traveled to his workshops in Chicago, and this intense summer time was to address the specifics of this play in this space.

The show is a struggle between ambition and loyalty, power and love, in 44 BC Rome, with the Elements interpretation inspired by the myth of battling brothers Romulus and Remus. The show is being performed Friday through Aug. 14 outdoors in the stone atrium of the Church of the Transfiguration. The area by the ocean includes columns, large bronze doors and massive fir beams, and there will be pillars of fire surrounding the stage.

“The weight of the structure itself, and the sheer mass of the stone, add a certain gravitas to the story,” assistant director Christopher Kanaga, who plays Mark Antony, said in a press release. “After all, these are weighty subjects being explored – life and death, murder and revenge, republic vs. monarchy – and the decisions that these men make will last for decades to come. This structure is built to take that kind of weight.”

The outdoor setting, though, makes it even more complicated to make fight scenes realistic, notes Elements spokesperson Jennifer Lynch, because it's so hard to hide tricks when audience members are close by on different sides of the action.

But solving such problems is what Sandys does as he travels around the country to help theater companies. He's largely based in Chicago, where he has been involved with Remy Bumppo Theatre Company for 12 years and artistic director there for two. As an actor, he's performed in more than 150 theatrical productions nationwide, including off-Broadway and Texas; he's also directed many others.

Early athletic training, though, led him to stage combat, and Sandys is a certified fight director with The Society of American Fight Directors. His credits with those skills include more than 35 productions at Lyric Opera of Chicago and more than 25 at Goodman Theatre in that city, as well as on Broadway (Steppenwolf's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"), and at The Metropolitan Opera.

Sandys, who has masters' degrees in English literature from Cambridge University in England and Loyola University, likens Shakespeare to opera in its storytelling scope and how it tests so many of an actors' skills. And both opera and Shakespeare improve, he believes, when actors are excited about having swords in their hands. "The energy of what we're doing brings the play alive in a very different way," he says.

The weapons being used for Elements' "Julius Caesar" are very specific. The Roman swords, daggers and shields are replicas of the real thing from the Roman Empire, though the blades are constructed specifically for use on stage and screen, Lynch says.

Such attention to detail is important, Sandys says, because the play is set in a time that is a transition between ages, between "a culture that was barbaric and a culture that deems itself republican and that is facing its humanity is a different way. ... The story is universal and the weapons help to ground it in a specific time and place."

The weapons have an added dimension for the Elements show – the actors use them almost as musical instruments to create an original acoustic background. The shields and spears are used for percussion to create a dissonance, he says, for "battlescape" scenes and others.

The "Julius Caesar" production begins at the end of a five-day Shakespeare retreat for actors and Shakespeare enthusiasts in Orleans. As part of the group's yearlong celebration of Shakespeare's 450th birthday, the retreat has offered intensive theater immersion, including lectures and discussion, voice and movement workshops, scene study classes, and master classes with guest instructors.

# The Barnstable Patriot

## LEND YOUR EARS TO ELEMENTS' JULIUS CAESAR ORLEANS CHURCH A FINE SETTING FOR ROMAN TRAGEDY

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Written by John Watters, **Barnstable Patriot**

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Shakespeare's tragic play Julius Caesar purportedly was the Bard's first at his famed London Globe Theater in 1599. Likewise, the Elements Theatre Company of Orleans is also currently staging Julius Caesar in a new space, the magnificent atrium of their Church of the Transfiguration at the Community of Jesus. The imposing courtyard setting serves as a perfectly stunning backdrop for the company's truly inspiring production. With its lavish costuming, sharply honed acting and august theatrical space, this Elements Theatre Company production of Julius Caesar instantly makes it one of the Cape's most memorable Shakespearean performances of all time. Shakespeare penned Julius Caesar when his career was red hot. In the same year, he wrote As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing and The Merry Wives of Windsor. But arguably, JC's iconic lines "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" and "Et tu, Brute?" remain some of the Bard's most quoted lines 414 years later.

Under the able-handed direction of Sr. Danielle Dwyer this Julius Caesar soars with sight and sound. Dwyer is able to combine the intimacy of the columned setting, the sound of the slap of the sandals on the stone floor, the dance of burning torches, the rich acting and the beautifully composed music by Rock Harbor Academy's Alex Pugsley, into not just a play for the audience to view but more like the transport of actually being there.

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Element's repertory cast is deep with talent, but Brad Lussier as Marcus Brutus and Chris Kanaga as Mark Antony lead the way. Lussier's multi-layered portrayal of Brutus, a complex conspirator wanting to bring forth the demise of the self-centered dictator Julius Caesar, is near perfect. Clearly torn between the respect of his leader and the state of Rome itself, he becomes an instrumental tool in the demise of Caesar. Kanaga brings forth a robust impersonation of Mark Antony, who must create an air of damage control for the people of Rome, who are ready for blood lust in reciprocation for the assassination of their leader. Kanaga's powerful performance ripples with strength and stoicism.

Peter Haig ably wears the laurel wreath of Julius Caesar. His portrayal builds in strength from the beginning of the play until the curtain, with some of his most effective moments coming as Caesar's ghost.

Another stellar performance is turned in by Rachel McKendree as Cassius, who draws the audience's focus each time she's on stage. Other notable performances are Lindsey Kanaga as the Soothsayer, Heather Norman as Portia, Kyle Norman as Caska and Dwyer as Calphurnia.

In a play that has so many wonderful elements, a special note needs to be addressed to the costuming by Michelle Rich. The accurately designed costumes are simply spectacular.

If you are a Shakespearean scholar or have never been exposed to the Bard's work you could do no better than catching this shimmering production.

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